

[William Felos]

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August 18, 1939.

William [Felos?], ([Greek?])

130 West [Forsyth?]-st.,

Hat Cleaner and Hat

Blocker,

Gus & Co.,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

WILLIAM FELOS, HAT CLEANER AND BLOCKER.

Gus & [Company's?] business occupies the double [aroads?] at 130 West [Forsyth?]-st., adjoining the [Seminole?] [Hotel?]. Gus' other name is [Felos?], pronounced "[Fellus?]," but the Americans called him "Fellers", "[Failus?]", "Felix" and "[Fillus?]" - but everybody could remember "Gus" so that is the name on the big sign over the front door, brilliant with colored electric light globes at night.

First there was "Old Gus" and "Young Gus," and now there is "Little Gus".

The [Seminole?] Hotel is one of the older [hostelries?] of Jacksonville, with a steady traveling clientele. It is also popular as a dining and gathering place for the older residents

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with retentive memories of its past glory, and is particularly liked by smaller organizations of women for dinners, banquets, and meetings, on account of its well appointed public reception rooms and its dining service. You can [eat?] all over the place.

Its adjoining building is a good location for Gus & Co., too, and there is a steady stream of transient customers coming in for their shoes to be 'shined or repaired, or old hats battered by traveling, to be reblocked and cleaned. "Old Gus" established the business in 1909.

Gus, the son, — short, black-eyed, with a fringe of sleek black hair over his ears and around his bald [pate?] — 1 walks nervously up and down, snapping his fingers to galvanize into action the small negro boys when a customer walks down the polished aisle and mounts one of the high shone-shine chairs with their metal feet rests; darts to the cash register to make change for a departing customer; turns the radio on to get a favorite program, and turns it off when the program is finished — like he was saving gas — the minute it is over; watches the two front doors, as he is the official "greeter" and contacts such customer as he arrives and departs.

A complete shoe repair department occupies the entire east [aroad?], with noisy electrically-operated up-to-date machinery for all phases of the work, a row of chairs lining the wall for the persons who sit in stockinged-feet while waiting for minor repairs to their shoes.

The west [aroad?] is taken up with the shoe-shine stand accommodating twenty persons at a time, a very exciting place with the negro shine boys jiggling in time to the electric [victrola?], usually blaring away at full speed to drown out the noise of the heavy shoe repair machinery.

At the end of the [aroad?] is the hat department — "Cleaning and re-blocking at reasonable prices." In the glass case in front of the end wall, from floor to ceiling are the

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hats — big, little, dark, light, felt, straw, [leghorn?]— an array of fifty or more, some ready for delivery, others waiting for customers who [forgot?] to come back.

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Young Gus gives through the West [aroade?] quickly naming a price for new sales and straightening the run-over heels on a pair of brown and white oxfords, which a woman [alighting?] from an automobile she has just parked at the curb, [holds?] out gingerly, inquiring, “How much ?”

Today he is followed by two youngsters — one about ten and the other twelve — darting here and there like a / couple of flat-footed ducks. The third generation of hat-blockers, shoe-repairers, shoe-shiners of the [Felos?] dynasty adapting themselves to American methods.

“William [Felos?] gone to lunch. Back in twenty minutes.” said Gus, the second. “You see him. He's secretary the church, good scholar. Wish I could help you, but don't know anything. He's smart. He can talk.”

“How is your father?”

“He sick, very sick man. Comes down to business no more. These two my boys. Big one Gus, the other George.”

Gus, the III, and young George looked almost like twins, and were dressed alike in tan shirts, khaki trousers, and sneakers on their feet. Their light brown tousled heads bobbed a “[Howde?]”, and their bright brown eyes sparkled [about?] their sensitive mouths and pointed chins. An older son, who had been operating the electric shoe-soler, now joined the interested company, wiping his hand on the leather apron as he glanced critically at the upturned shoe in his left[.] hand.

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The “ducklings” almost as tall as Gus II listened eagerly to a careful explanation of the information desired, the shoe repairer started the soler, and Gus II half yelled to 3 make himself heard above the din - the machinery, the electric [victrola?] grinding out a “hot-cha” to which the negro shoe-shine boys were keeping time with their polishing rags, emphasizing the loud swells with a double snappity-snappity-snap-snap, the two big electric fans whirring steadily and noisily at the ceiling as their [?] long revolving blades fanned the air heavy with the odor of [bonsine?], leather, bannana oil and polish — “You come back at 2:30. I tell him [you?] come.”

At 2:30 William [Felos?] had returned from lunch, and with long sensitive fingers was carefully pressing into shape a bias sweatband to be sewed into the freshly cleaned [Panama?] hat upon the long glass show-case back of which he stood at the end of the shoe-shining department.

He is a tall man, with a strikingly handsome face, fine-grained fair skin, wavy iron-gray hair worn in a [pompadour?], and light brown eyes. He was dressed in gray trousers and blue and white striped shirt, with dark blue silk tie.

“I am sorry — busy now. [Mabbe?] you could come back at four? I be through then.” he speaks slowly, measuring his words, with a slight drawl through teeth close together, and a slow friendly smile.

At four o'clock William [Felos?] had finished his work for the day. With the early edition of the Jacksonville Journal spread out before him on the glass [stopped?] topped case, [now?] cleaned of its smear of white polish, the [benzine?] soaked rags, and the [chamois?] skin finisher, he was glancing over the sport headlines.

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"I been here, right here in Jacksonville, twenty-five years. My home in L-[a?]-o-n-t-a-v-i-o-n"— Mr. [Felos?] carefully spelled out the name, at the same time printing it on a scratch pad in carefully formed square letters.

"It is a small country village in the province of Aroudia, near the seaport of Sparta, in [P-o-l-o-p-e-n-i-s-n-a?]"— he again resorted to the scratch pad.

"My father was a farmer. I started to school when I was six and graduated when I was fifteen, that is, from high school. I had to walk a long ways — took an hour to go and come. But I was glad, because I liked to go to school.

"I learned reading and writing, and to figure in the [grammar?] schools. All children go — boys and girls, together — but in high school the boys and girls go separate, have different rooms and different teachers — all men teachers, though, and very straight (strict).

"In high school i study geometry, algebra, calculation, [Homer?, [Cissre?], the Greek classics. For language we took up Latin, Spanish, French, German, Greek, and [anchen [(?)ancient)?] Greek"— again the scratch pad. It was difficult to understand his low voice amid the dim of the busy place, but he was very patient, and anxious that everything should be put down correctly.

"The anchen Greek - you know - like the time of Christ. It is different, just like pure English, and English mixed with American slang — but like [Homer?] the [Odysus?]" - he called it "[Oddyishus?]."

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"I love [Homer?]. But best of all I liked astronomy." He pronounced it as if it were spelled "[ahstrono-o-me?].

"You know, in Greece are such lovely blue skies at night, and the stars so close you can almost reach out and touch them. It is like that [here?], sometimes — when there is no

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fog. But I can't go on here. I find nobody interested to teach me about the stars. I have my books, yes, but one gets tired trying to figure things out by himself.

“Do you have a telescope?”

“No telescope, but a very good / field glass. It is perfect. I make my charts and watch the changes in the evening and morning stars, the rising and waning [constellations?] — but it is all so wonderful, a never-ending study.

“I finished school in 1914. My father was very sickly, and not long to live, and when my cousin - Gus in the door, there - came to [home?] in the [summer?] winter of 1914, my father sayd - ‘You go back to American with Gus. You have better chance there. [Germany?], Italy, the big powerful nations of Europe will soon swallow up the smaller countries — and Greece, the great Greece of olden times, of Pericles, [Cicero, Homer?], Pythagoras — will be no more — just target for bullets, or [fodder?] for the big war machine.’

“Young Gus came on to the old village and visited a while with us, and on January 25, 1914, we sailed from the part of Patras, on the English S. S. [Franconia?].

“You see, Greece had been [embroiled?] in the war in the Balkans in 1912 — seemed like there was always trouble in 6 the Balkans — and a great many young Greeks in the United States came over to help out the mother country.

“No, they were not obliged to — they just volunteered, but the trouble was soon over, and they all returned. Then when it seemed there would be a general war in Europe, nobody knew what would happen to Greece, so my father thought it better for me to come with young Gus.

“Old Gus, that is, my uncle is my father's brother, and his health not so good, either, so he thought a young man like me would be a help in the business, and here I am.

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"We were about ten days crossing the Atlantic. We landed in New York City, and came right to Jacksonville. That was in February, 1914.

"I had a time learning the language — I still get stuck once in a while - he laughed. "I can still speak French pretty good, but have forgotten the Latin and German. I read the Greek, of course, but I have not kept up with the magazines or papers of the old country. I did have a lot of books I brought over and pictures — I wish I had them now, you would enjoy looking at them, but they are all [gone?] — lost in a fire that burned my home four years ago.

"I have bought other books, but they are American book, and as many as I could afford on astronomy.

"Where I came from the people lead a very simple life. The farmers — my father was a farmer, he died long ago — raised most of their foodstuff. Wonderful beans, okra, carrots, cabbages, potatoes — all grew nice in the fertile valley of the Daphne River.

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"There was always plenty to eat. Black bread — no low-[veetaleety?] white bread like the Americans use so much." By this time it was apparent that William [Felos intentions?] were of the throaty, close-lipped Greek, but his accent was decidedly French.

"Such melons they had! Like this - (he measured off two feet with his hands and fingers far apart) - but big and round like your watermelon. They taste like the honey dew, but are larger — twenty-five to forty-five pounds. They ship them to nearby countries, where they are greatly relished.

"We did not have much meat, but it was freshly killed, twice a week. No pork. But plenty fish and seafood. Lots of fruit. The climate in the valley is warm, like here, but not so much rain. There were oranges, lemons, limes, and on the hillsides, large vineyards of grapes.

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"Everybody drank wine, mostly sour wine — you would probably say veenegar — but it was more healthy than water. There were no sewer systems, no sanitary — not much [sanastation?]. It was not possible, on account of the floods when the mountain snows melted in the spring and the Daphne rushed all over the valley. It would have torn out sewers.

"The country people had wells and mountain springs, the water cold and [good?], but they did not drink it. No water in Greece for drinking, only wine. The water used for bathing and washing.

"The Grecian women did their own work — we have no blacks there — and cooked good meals for their families, 8 seasoned with the green peppers, garlic, [leeks?], and nice big sweet onions. They did the family washing, too. Sometimes beating the clothes on the flat rocks at the mountain streams — they were all about. There are no laundries there and stiff, starched collars.

"The farmers raised sheep, cut the wool, which the women washed snow white and carded and spun into yarn, weaving it into clothing for the men and boys, with [gay?] cottons — like you say, prints — for the women and girls. "

He stopped talking, reaching behind into the tall glass-fronted case with its many shelves, and removed a Panama hat — the same one he had been preparing the band for earlier in the afternoon. A woman, with a ten-year old girl had entered the [aroade?] and was approaching the hat counter.

"My! It looks like [now.]"? she commented.

William [Felos?] said not a word, but as / she [??] handed him a five dollar bill, he touched a bell on the counter, at which Gus [III?] slid up, grabbed the bill, with the stub the woman had produced, and whirled himself to the cash register where Gus II was already stationed, in anticipation, handed out the correct change, which Gus III III covered with his

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two small hands, and slid back to the hat counter. The woman stuffed the money into a small change purse.

Oblivious to her surroundings, she places six small purchases from the ten-cent store on the counter.

"Give me an extra bag," she requested. Silently the slim, strong hands folded another green "Gus & Co. Hat Cleaners and Blockers' bag in the middle and slipped it into the other bag with the hat.

"Let me see if [I] got all my change." She emptied her purse on the counter, and mentally counted up the change she should have as she removed the sales slips from the numerous bundles. "Virginia, you [got] the bundle with the baby's rubber pants?"

"Y-e-s, m-a-a-a-m," drawled Virginia, her left elbow on the counter, as she rested her small back tired from much [trotting?] around with adult shopping, her left [foot?] tapping out the rhythm of the electric [victrola?], as she watched the shoe-shine boys jiggling back and forth.

"And the safety-pins?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I guess everything's here. Ho How much was the hat?" " Silently William [Felos?] produced the duplicate of the numbered claim check plainly marked in large figures — \$1.25.

Out came the bills again and all the small change on the counter. She went carefully over it all, counting out loud. "[Okah?]. Come on, Virginia."

William [Felos?] slowly closed the case.

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“Did you think she had a right to the extra bag?”

“Oh, it's all right. She wanted that to put the baby pants, the safety-pins, the buttons and snappers, the can opener, and the new stopper of the bath-tub that she had bought at [Krossos?]. But Virginia will carry one bag, 10 probably the one with the hat, as it is lighter than the other one, and the mother will carry the one stuffed with the smaller bundles. Gus & Co. in big letters - six inches on the outside will advertise our business /to the other riders in the [bus?] and when she gets home the neighbors will say - ‘Just saw Mrs. So-and-so come in with two hats from Gus's. I did not know her old man had two summer hats.’”

He smiled his slow smile, and his grave eyes twinkled at the thought of the double advertising.

“You want to know about the Spartan law? Well, it is as old — as you say, the hills — I do not know when it started. But the Greeks, you know, in the olden times spent much time in developing a fine, graceful body. It was part of their daily life for centuries — a poor body was a disgrace. When a baby was born deformed or crippled, the parents were informed; it became the ward, so to say, of the community, the doctor had charge of it for a year in the [cleaic?]. The parents could [come?] and see it, and the doctor tried everything he knew to correct the condition, but at the end of a year, if it was no better, and the doctor felt he had done all he possibly could, the baby was destroyed — thrown in the river.

“A bad law? Perhaps. But we have always had bad laws. There was the [Hindu?] law where the girl babies were drowned in the Ganges — they did not want girl babies, only boy babies for the wars. Then there was [Hered's?] law at the time of Christ when the boy babies were ordered killed. We have not changed much when it comes to cruelty. Now we 11 build planes that drop bombs, and guns that shoot two hundred miles — not to kill pests or carry on commerce, but to kill people, innocent people, and nice young men in the

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world's armies, who never harmed a thing larger than a flea — all for what? To keep up the nation's honor!

“Well, the most disease we have in Greece is the terrible malaria. I used to have it each summer. Every other day, chills and fever, all day long, until I got so weak I could hardly stand.”

“Weren't you afraid of being thrown in the river?”

“No,” he laughed. “But after I finished school, father think I better come to America — with young Gus.

“I'll never forget the trip. The blue Mediterranean, touching at the age-old seaports — [Palerme, Cerfu, Marseilles, Bareelena?], in Spain - Valencia, Carthagenus, Malaga — now stripped of their historic buildings, their people killed by shells and bombs in the civil war — all for what? Political [presteeje?! I am glad I saw them in their old settings of Spanish custom and beauty. It took a long time, it seemed, before we got to the Atlantic.

“Some of our people suffer in the homeland from tuberculosis, the same as everywhere — jut like here — but it is not [prevalent?]. They go up in the mountains and sometimes live a long time on cheese and goat's milk, sour wine and hard black bread.

“For the malaria the doctor gives us a bitter medicine.

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I do not know if it is [quineene?] — but it is bitter, yes, and helps with the fever.”

He had stopped talking as his eyes fixed themselves upon a bare-headed man slowly approaching the hat counter, his near-sighted eyes [peering?] forth from behind old fashioned gold-rimmed glasses, his gray hair parted primly all the way back in the exact center.

Calmly William [Felos?] reached back into the case and brought forth a yellowed Panama.

"Looks like new. How much?" queried the customer, as he rammed the hat on his head.

Silently the ticket was presented - 75¢. The man produced a dollar bill, William [Felos'?] hand sought the counter-bell, and this time George - the younger - skated up, sliding the last two feet, grabbed the dollar bill, and in double-quick slid back with a quarter.

Everything about Gus & Company's moves to the tempo of the fast-playing electric victrola — that is, everything but [Demetries?], the shoe-repairer with his [roving?], ex-like eyes, his mouth full of tacks, his hands mechanically driving a half sole on the brown and white oxfords; and William [Felos?], the scholar, with the far-away look in his grave eyes and his mind on the stars.

"I have not told you about the wine? Lots of it they make, all kinds, the same as [here?] — part, claret, sherry, [museatal?]. In the sour wine they put [rosin?], in fact, in most of the wine they do this. It makes it smooth and oily, and gives it a tang that is good.

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"The year I came away, one of the cafes in Sparta ordered five hundred gallons wine from our neighborhood — different kinds — which was delivered to him and placed in the long cellar dug in the rocks and cool, deep under his place of business."

Another bare-headed old gentleman came in, and silently William reached behind in his customary gesture and this time brought forth a clean, stiffened brown [leghorn?].

"Just like new. Here's a dollar."

Gus [III?] [a / lthered?] up in his soft sneakers, confiscated the bill and handed it to his father, who rang it up on the cash register with a loud clatter.

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"The man had no coupon. Do you ever get them mixed, and give out the wrong derby?"

William [Felos/] laughed. "Not this man, he's old friend. And the hat, too. I clean it so often, pretty soon I should own it. I would know that hat if I meet it in the middle of Forsyth and Broad Streets."

"When I was a boy," he picked up the thread of his story, "the farming in our section was carried on with oxen, and mostly wooden plowes with steel or metal shares. Horses could not twist around the rocks. Never could they use tractors. Now they have steel plows. But most of the fields are small, on the edge of town, not whole sections of land like [here?] - five or six hundred acres. Just little fields, of a block or more, and lots of it cultivated like gardens by hand, with hoes and rakes.

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In answer to a direct question ,he said:

"There are very few Greeks in Asia Minor now. Before 1922 it was seventy-five percent Greeks, but after the uprising in 1922, they mostly leave, scatter out different place. Just few there now in business.

"I forgot to tell you about the University. In Athens there is the great government-owned Atlas University, where they teach all the sciences, law and medicine. It is known the world over, and has existed for centuries. It is great to be graduate from there."

"But you like it here — you are satisfied?"

"Oh, yes, yes! American is the greatest country and the richest country in the world today. The old [capital-cestie?] (he deliberated on the [pronunciation?]) [seestym?] is passing. They once owned the laboring man and the mechanics, but no more. The working men - the [forgot?] man - is new coming into his own. Every man should be honored for what he can do — if a hat man like myself, if he is expert' - he should be honored the same as

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a doctor or lawyer. The same with a restaurant man, a shoemaker like [Domotries?], or a ditch-digger.

"I think President Roosevelt is the greatest man of my years — of my lifetime — well, what I mean to say is of this day and ago. He tries to help everybody. His ideas good, but sometimes the [politeechians?] prevent them to be carried out. There is always in America that awful graft! I like to see honest men in office, men not afraid to hold up their heads, and not always with their hands behind them looking for contributions.

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"And the gambling! That is America's curse. I talk to these my young cousins, and I say - 'Gus and George, dont start to gamble. It will ruin you.'

"You see in my country there is the National Lottery. If you wish to gamble, that is your own business, but it must be according to law, and everybody gets a little — [mebbe?], only a nickel's worth, but something.

"The money over there? It is a unit called the [drachma?] — like the French franc. No, it does not go like the [decoomawl?] (decimal) but like this" - he wrote on the scratch pad - one, two, five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, 1 one hundred, two hundred, and so on, [?] five thousand, ten thousand - any amount. The value is around five cents in our money.

"No, I have no family. I was married in 1930, but separate in 1933. My wife was an American girl, but -" he threw his hands palm upward in a French gesture of despair - "it was no good. "American girls not like the Grecian, all for the home. They want to go places, do things, have company; men, too, and no questions asked. The women — it does no use to argue with them, and say what you expect — they have all the answers, at least all the good ones, and a man gets no chance. It is money, money all the time."

"Do you always knock off at four?"

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"Knock off? Yes, mostly I be through by that time. I work here possibly five hours a day — you see, I am secretary of the church — the Orthodox Greek Community here— and in the morning I do that work, write letters, 16 keep tab on the three hundred and fifty Greeks in this locality, and help the priest, Rev. [Elias?] Skipitares, with his work.

"Mr. Georges K. [Sthathis?] is the President of the board, and we have five other officers besides ourselves.

"You may say that ninety out of every one hundred Greeks in America are naturalized American citizens. They are peaceful, law-abiding people, mostly in business for themselves — small businesses like fruit and candy stores, groceries, restaurants, and shops like this. They are quick to adapt themselves to your ways here, and are most anxious to bring up the coming generation as full-fledged Americans.

"I am a Democrat, and vote at the regular elections like other Floridians. We pay our share of taxes, and our minds are easy. We are not afraid of being called scamps or tricksters."

Mr. William [Felos?] was folding up his evening paper, preparatory to departure, as if this was all he had to tell. It was five o'clock. In the hour, Gus [III?] and Young George had made six trips for him to the cash register, totaling a contribution from his department of the sum of \$7.50 — not bad for one hour!

"Have your ever been to Miami?"

"No, I have not travel much in Florida."

"The University of Miami teaches astronomy and they have a small observatory there."

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"Yes?" His face lighted up enthusiastically. "[Mebbe?], some day I take time off and go there. It would be great to view the Southern Cross through a good telescope."

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And so — if the idea takes root — William [Felos?], Greek-American citizen of Jacksonville, Florida, may some day add to his knowledge of [a-h-s-t-r-o-n-a-n-o-m-e-?].